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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of religious beliefs in children's education. It raises the question of whether educators should encourage talk about a child's religion in the classroom, in parent-teacher conversations, and in preservice and professional development settings. The article uses two vignettes drawn from a study of a public elementary school in New York City. The vignettes focus on how the celebration of Halloween and the school's talent show brought into sharp focus the mediating factors that religion can wield in education. The paper describes the classroom setting and the culture of the school. It discusses the opening of the school year and provides a detailed explanation of how one little girl reacted to the school's elaborate celebration of Halloween. It describes how religious beliefs came to bear on the celebration and the effects that this event had on the child and her parents. The vignette highlights how the uneasy place of religion in public schools and parents' desire not to have their children stand out can lead to mistrust and silence, both of which are counterproductive to education. The article describes the importance of collaborative forums so that the boundaries between home and school can be explored in an open manner. Contains 18 references. (RJM)

Religious Identity at School or Not?: Expanding the Classroom Community to Include *All* Families

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Introduction

After many years teaching K-8 children and writing about my own and others' classroom practice, I began a project on cultural interchange to document how teachers, parents, and children come to see the world through others' eyes.[1] This project provoked an old quandary about what teachers needed to know of children's home life. My early training suggested that the most valuable information came from a careful examination of children's work and their lives in school, since teachers can base their interventions only on what they see in the classroom. I may have reached this conclusion because, like many teachers, I never had the opportunity to look closely beyond the school day. This cultural interchange project has allowed me to think more about the powerful influences that operate under the surface of observable behavior and about what happens when teachers see children reflected through their own cultural lens. During this project, I began to see how students might benefit from increased teacher knowledge about what children usually leave at home. Before I observed children in their homes, communities, and churches, I did not anticipate how much religious belief mattered to families because in my experience religious discussion rarely showed up in school.[2]

All children must make sense of the differences between home and school, but some children have more distance to travel than others. Deborah Mitchell (all names are pseudonymous) is a seven year old who attends a public school chosen for its proximity to her mother's work place. Deborah travels a long way geographically and psychologically--this is her first experience with White peers, her first secular classroom, her first White teacher, and her first experience away from a Caribbean-centered neighborhood and school life. To explore how to reduce barriers that may inhibit learning for

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[1] During the 1996-97 academic year, a research team from the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) began a study in four different sites which conceptualized the classroom as the most appropriate place to observe the process of cultural interchange by which families, children, and teachers with different traditions, beliefs, and experience come to mutual understanding. This work is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-initiated grant #R306F60079. The perspective represented here is my responsibility, not the granting agency.

[2] I want to make clear at the outset that I am talking about educational implications, not the legal issues often associated with religion in schools.

children like Deborah (Kohl, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Poplin, 1993; Rose,1989) I have recorded the story of her family's experience in an urban public elementary school.

One rarely explored barrier is religious belief. When educators exclude it, they erect a particularly invisible barrier for children whose relationship to God is central to their life.[3] My intention here is to consider religion as a silenced dialogue (Delpit, 1995). Just as race and ethnicity inform a cultural world view, religion is a life-view, a cultural way of seeing the world. As a colleague reminds me: "You can't just watch me on the Sabbath to see how religion affects my life." [4] Race and ethnicity are familiar topics now, even as they are awkward and evaded (Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1993, Murphy and Ucelli, 1989, Jervis, 1996), but religious faith is easier to ignore.[5] The importance of religious

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[3] Early in the study, as I tried to figure out the notion of barriers that inhibit learning, I happened to visit my 8 year-old niece in a midwestern suburb. She is Zoroastrian and had just returned from India after a first-time visit to her maternal Parsi grandparents to celebrate her recent Navjote, a coming of age ceremony. With pride, she had brought back for her class a carefully chosen mythology book and a small religious statue. The (African-American) teacher kept these items for a day and then returned them saying "they were inappropriate for school." My niece was devastated and I saw how her parents' irritation with the teacher's narrowness seeped out at home. When I visited school the day after her rejection, it was no surprise to find her unengaged in the quite wonderful Hypertext computer project and unwilling to enlist the teacher's help with glitches. At bed-time, in answer to my question, "Do you ever talk about your religion at school," she snapped, "No, of course not." Her nine-year old brother said sadly, "No one's interested." This was first hand experience of how religion as a barrier plays out at home and school when no mutual understanding is attempted. A year later, when my nephew completed a unit on six world religions, his own was not included. His teacher had not heard of Zoroastrianism and my nephew felt left out and excluded. When his mother volunteered to do a presentation, he didn't want her to because he "felt like he had two heads or something..." (The class studied Taoism, though no Taoists were in the class.)

[4] David Bensman, Kemly McGregor, and Jianzhong Xu are colleagues on the cultural interchange research team. Each team member clarifies different issues, but in the case of religion, Kemly has been my guide. She has walked me through a terrain that is so unfamiliar to me that my head hurts when I try to understand the qualitity of religious commitment involved in a religious home. Without Kemly's help, I wouldn't have been able to form a relationship with this family because I wouldn't have had anyone to coach me what was in front of my eyes. What I have learned from Kemly is the most visceral attempt at cultural interchange I have experienced (which raises ethnographic issues that both keep me awake at night and reaffirm how our method has enabled us to see with fresh eyes). Still, everytime I look out over a classroom or a parent group, I imagine that they are all as different from me and from each other as I am from Kemly and the study family. This gives me some notion of how far we have to go in making schools comfortable places for *all* families.

[5] There are dilemmas of presenting this paper — especially in circles where academics and intellectuals sometimes condescend and the private nature of religion is culturally sanctioned. For the secular among us, it takes some effort to keep the focus on religion; the tendency is often to dismiss religion casually rather than intentionally to avoid it. Talk of religion by the religious can

belief is likely underappreciated as a factor in family-school relationships and religious feeling more widely misunderstood than many educators recognize. In coming to understand how parents see the world, educators need to know about children and their families, but what is it they need to know? What should we seek out about a child's religious beliefs? How can we talk to families about their responsibility for providing knowledge in ways that are meaningful and not intimidating? When does a teacher's need to know become intrusive?

Underlying our study is the premise that if students are to reach their highest potential, they must connect what happens in classrooms with their experiences beyond school. Where cultural interchange takes place, children are encouraged to bring their whole selves to school unashamedly, connecting home and school in a way that strengthens their learning. Where cultural interchange is absent, children are asked to compartmentalize themselves, hide their identities, and keep their interests undercover. Religion is one arena where children are likely to keep themselves in check. Therefore I am using Deborah's story to raise the question: should educators invite talk about a child's religion — a private matter in America — into the classroom, into parent-teacher conversations, and into preservice and professional development settings, even in the face of certain backlash? I don't pretend to know what such discussions would look like, since they are non-existent now. Constitutional church / state separation militates against inviting religious beliefs into the classroom and into teachers' discussions, but despite the potential explosiveness, educators need to know what is on children's minds.

To focus the discussion, I have selected— extracted is a better word— two vignettes from an entire year's data collection in Karen Mulloy's 1996-97 classroom at PS 131 in New York City. Both Halloween and the Friday Night Talent Show put Deborah in difficult situations unmediated by school adults who had no prior knowledge of her Seventh-day Adventist background. In some ways, Karen,[6] Deborah, and Deborah's parents are a best-case example

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shut down discussion because such talk discomforts others as it breaches the church / state constitutional separation or feels like proselytizing.

[6] Teachers—but not scholars— are often referred to by first names in academic journals, emphasizing the tradition that knowledge about teaching and learning is created by those outside the classroom rather than inside. Although I do not want to add to that tradition, all teachers go by first names at PS 131. Also, the collaborative work Karen and I have done over the last 17 years naturally requires first names. Parents and teachers also call each other by first names.

of what we mean by cultural interchange because everyone involved agreed she had a successful year at school. But Deborah's transition to this new school might have been more comfortable and her learning made easier if her family's religious belief had been acknowledged. I have set down what happened in some detail so that readers can put forward variant interpretations, devise other language, or pose more relevant questions about whether teachers and parents should encourage children to share their religious identity in schools.

When I began this project, I was surprised to find much how religion mattered to the families I encountered. Religion has never been central to my life. Passover every other year or so is a pleasure and my family considers that enough religion. The most striking instance of my inexperience took place the first time I visited Deborah's religious Seventh-day Adventist family. Her father had just come home from work. He asked me "Are you religious? " I was standing in the center of the living room, crossing to retrieve a pencil. I asked him if he was religious, (wasn't I the researcher?) and instantly we cut to the heart of belief, right in front of an aunt, an uncle, the mother and two children who all watched me from the periphery of the room as I struggled to answer to his question, "Do you believe in God?"

"Well, uh, no," I stammered.

"Do you believe in any Higher Being?"

"Not exactly." I remember being dizzy as I said it.

"You're an atheist, then?"

"I guess so." The mother sucked in her breath. The children hung on every word. Finally he elicited that I'm involved in family ritual at home (Passover) and that I might be comfortable being called a humanist. I know now how I might have better answered -- with a discussion of what kind of a God do I not believe in. But the point is how different my Reform Jewish world view is from that of this observant Seventh-day Adventist family from Grenada. As I try to understand the quality of religious commitment involved in a religious home, it gives me some notion of how I and other educators often make assumptions without sufficient understanding. To secular readers, these stories I am about to

tell may seem trivial, but not so for those whose centrality is their relationship with God.

1
DEBORAH'S CLASSROOM: A FERTILE CONTEXT FOR CULTURAL INTERCHANGE

Deborah's mother, Virginia (as I am calling her) assumed that all public schools are alike; location alone entered into her choice and she did not know what Deborah would encounter at PS 131. Good schools are not all the same, but PS 131 is remarkably different. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, about the first "head teacher," as the founding principal liked to be called. He was seen one day disciplining a group of children, his tall frame lowered to meet them eye-to-eye. In his charming New Zealand accent he gently demanded that they must never, never slide down the banister again. Then he took his leave, sliding down the banister. That spirit still infuses the school as children learn to raise their own voices, question authority, and negotiate their own education.

The diversity of PS 131 is the reason many families choose to send their children there. The demographics are neither those of the inner city, nor middle class suburbia. No single cultural, racial, or ethnic group predominates. The school receives federal money to support integration, has a high number of interracial families, and is also known to be a comfortable place for gay and lesbian families. Karen's 1996-97 classroom reflects New York City's diversity: parents were born in America, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Egypt, England, France, Grenada, Holland, Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco, Palestine, Puerto Rico, and Russia. Children with mixed ethnic heritages and racial identities are the norm. Economic status, religious beliefs, educational backgrounds, family constellations, and employment circumstances span the widest possible spectrum.[7]

What Karen Values

It is important to Karen that she walks to school each day, and passes where she was born and went to public school. In her early fifties, she is proud of her family's working class origins. Karen has been teaching at PS 131 since

[7] Between the time we applied for this grant and the time it was granted, the homeless shelters had been removed by the Mayor to outlying boroughs, so there were no homeless families enrolled in this classroom.

the second year of its founding and is clear about her vocation: "I choose to do my work in a school because people in schools are receptive to trying out their own ideas. Every moment is an opportunity for growth. Schools then are places for all to develop: teachers, children, parents, custodians, cooks, aides, guards, repair, construction persons, volunteers, and researchers." Karen's own receptivity to my scrutiny and her willingness to argue about philosophy and pedagogy made her an ideal choice for this project.[8] Karen understands the possibilities and paradoxes of cultural interchange as well as anyone on the research team.

Children in Karen's class are emotionally and intellectually engaged, which makes it a good place to observe. In this classroom, the kids and Karen are "visible" [her word] to each other and to me. Karen believes that children learn by being "in conversation with each other." She refers to the class as a "family" and the classroom as a "house." Karen "cherishes and appreciates" [her words] individuals with all their idiosyncrasies and strengths. Karen has removed many traditional structures of school to make time and space for children's own agendas. She says to children: "I don't want to interrupt *your* work." Freedom from large numbers of imposed teacher assignments gives children time to get to know each other, to teach each other, to be helpful and be helped. Karen discourages competition, classroom stars in any field, "buying off kids" with toys, shared possessions, or junk food. She does not emphasize revision nor does she value strong academic push until children "feel it in their belly."

The School Year Begins

PS 131 was started by parents in 1971 and parents have a strong say in school governance. Yet parents in Karen's class have to be willing to persist over several weeks in a setting that may not make sense to them. Her classroom may require children to engage in very different modes of schooling than parents themselves have known or develop significantly different relationships with the teacher than parents may have experienced.

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[8] In 1981-82, I was in Karen's class as a teacher- researcher (reported in Jervis, 1986). In our earlier collaboration, we agreed that she would teach and I would write . We began this year's project in line with that agreement. I was a note-taking observer, available to children for help and conversation.

The first day of school Karen sends home a three page single-spaced letter to "make myself visible to families." Parents retrieve the following missive from children's backpacks, and along with snack, trip, and homework information, they encounter Karen's philosophy and the authority of her voice. An excerpt gives the flavor of the whole:

> I have been teaching at this school since 1972. During those years... I have developed some firm ideas. Let me tell you some of the things I think. All people are educable. Children learn best when the surround is non-threatening, when they are assured of safety, justice, and have friends. With the help of interesting people to work with, interesting material to investigate and people who are interested in their ideas, the children are able to recognize the contributions of others and make contributions themselves. Children can see who they are and become who they are not yet.... This coming to know is a lifelong process. Education is a lifelong process.

In addition to a window into Karen's pedagogy, the letter includes an invitation to parents:

> I am very interested in what you think is important for your child's development...I have found that if asked, people are willing to share their thoughts. As nurturing children is a partnership, I think it would be helpful if I knew some of your thinking. Please do some thinking and writing about your child's interests, ways of going about things and concerns you have. Let me know the language you speak at home with your children. This kind of reflection is hard work. I also know how valuable it is for our work together. Please feel free to write out as much as you'd like; it is an important thing to do for yourself. I would most appreciate your sharing this with me, perhaps sometime next week.

In the 1996 school year, not every parent was enamored of this complex disquisition on education: One new parent in Karen's class did not accept Karen's invitation: [9]

> On the first day of school, I was devastated to find my child placed in a second/third grade class instead of a first/second grade I'd expected. I was also distressed by the physical appearance of the classroom. The principal asked me to give it two weeks. I felt

[9] The story of this parent's developing relationship is told by Karen, the parent and me in "In the Face of my Resistance...: Stephanie's Parent and Teacher Gain a Working Trust."

betrayed; I didn't trust the school and I wasn't going to write deeply personal things to her teacher.

Only later did this parent (among others) come to appreciate Karen's class, but Virginia was immediately captivated by the letter's "thoughtfulness and genuineness." She said: "I rested easier after I studied the letter and reread it several times. I felt inspired by Karen's seriousness and ready to entrust my daughter to her care." Virginia wrote a careful handwritten description of Deborah on yellow legal pad paper in answer to Karen's request. Karen has never asked parents to volunteer information on religion. Should she invite parents to do so is one of the questions this study has raised.

Deborah embarked on her school life, entering some activities with enthusiasm and resisting others with vehemence. She had known her old friends, she said, "since I was a baby," and making new friends was "scary." While Virginia was "nervous about public school," didn't understand Deborah's empty math notebook or the absence of textbooks, and didn't like the struggles each night over the open-ended homework assignments, she was thrilled and relieved that when Deborah invited two White classmates to her birthday party at home, both immediately accepted. Despite tensions in September between parents' notions of school and Karen's firmly held values about what constitutes successful learning, and the apprehensions about social life, over time the MItchell's and other families learn to negotiate unfamiliar terrain. The process of beginning each year is not always smooth, but it does eventually result in a high degree of cultural interchange. However, in October neither Deborah nor Virginia knew about Halloween at PS 131.

2
HALLOWEEN: THE COMMUNITY HOLDS A MIRROR TO ITSELF AND DEBORAH ISN'T REFLECTED

As quickly as I heard religion come up at Deborah's home, the first intimation of her religious background did not appear at school until Halloween, and then only vaguely. Her earliest mention of religion easily escaped Karen's notice. Entitled "Aunty's baby's dedication", Deborah described this event: "The baby had a lovely white dress and the preacher blest her. I enjoyed singing

and playing with my freinds. After that I went home and we changed our close. Then we had a party (9/21/96)." [10]

Of more concern to Karen was Deborah's tendency to copy printed text into her own notebook, which Karen took to mean Deborah had a "lack of trust in herself that she can do things" and that she "may not be fully present in her homework." Karen intuitively sensed that school work held areas where Deborah didn't trust herself -- and perhaps, Karen suggested, the family didn't trust the school, since the copying seemed to be done under parental guidance (9/17/96). In Karen's view, trusting oneself is crucial to academic progress and evidence for that trust is that work has to have what Karen calls the "stamp of the child" and "come from the belly."

Focused on the copying, Karen didn't register Deborah's religious interests in the copied Biblical parable of "The Prodigal Son" on October 7th:

> A man was rich he had two sons so one day the little son asked his father for the rich position and the father gave him. He left and went to a faraway land and spent all his money on wines and women, freids and parties. He was hungry and he had nothing to eat and no freinds. So he said I would go back home to my father. When he went back his father ran to him and fell on his knees and kissed him and put a ring on his finger.

On October 17th, just about the time school began gearing up for Halloween, Deborah wrote:

> The real name of Halloween is All Saint. The librarian said that and my mom said that too. The Dictionary says that a saint is a holy person. The Roman Catholic church publicly declares such holy people to be saints after death. In America people celebrate Halloween with pumpkins and scery masks, and gost like costumes.

Deborah shows herself to be a persistent seeker after authoritative information from the librarian, her mother, and the dictionary, yet a third-person reference book tone veils her struggle to make sense of the relationship between saints, holy people, and Halloween's pagan roots. "In America...." , perhaps a proxy for school, bespeaks a place far from Deborah's own experience. It was. No one at school recognized Deborah's religious background, nor did anyone foresee that the experience of Halloween was new to her.

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[10] I have retained Deborah's spelling and punctuation.

Deborah's First-Ever Halloween as the "New Kid on the Block"

Halloween at PS 131 is not a low key event. Deborah came to school not knowing what to expect. Excerpts from my field notes, October 31, 1996:

> I am struck by the contagious unself-conscious exuberance that would never have taken place at my own children's much stuffier school. Some parents are as elaborately costumed as kids are. Many faculty are dressed as corn products to make a political point in support of the guidance counselor whose hours have been cut and whose name is a variation on corn. Karen is an elaborate corn stalk. At 8:30 am kids congregate in this second / third grade classroom, appreciating each other's costumes. As Ivan's mom watches kids line up for the annual parade around the neighborhood, she observes: "Funny, the boys all look disgusting and the girls look beautiful." She is right—the boys have awful scars and dripping blood while the girls have sparkling eye make up and feather boas; even Lisa's tiger costume is glamorous rather than fierce. Only two children in Karen's class are not in costume: Tero ("My father didn't buy it yet") and second grade Deborah whose story I don't know. Deborah has on a red dress and a black and red jacket, not a usual school outfit, but not an obvious costume either. Before the parade someone asks her what is she. She doesn't say. Alexandra answers for her: "She's the new kid on the block." Sounds like a witty costume to me and I accept the comment at face value.
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> After the parade around the neighborhood, kids return to the classroom. Colette's mother is there, wearing a suit, high heels, colored foil fake eyelashes, and blood running down her mouth. She has brought snack (fruit and cheese—no sugar allowed in Karen's classroom, even on Halloween). Karen asks kids to write, draw, read, be quiet while some children get the apples together for the party and put finishing touches on the haunted house. Alexa's spooky tape is playing all of a sudden.
>
> Karen's class is hosting a haunted house for all the classes on the floor. Kids—mostly third graders— have planned the whole event, taking risks by climbing high up to hang skeletons and drape dark spaces. They have figured out imaginative ways to jump out and scare their peers. It is really very clever—and very scary—with kids in corners and closets leaping out without warning. The spider webs that were up on Tuesday are still intact, even with all the activity. Kids are pleased with what they are doing. Sam's mother comes in and kids ask if they can practice on her. Vinny tells her exactly what will happen and she agrees. She assures kids that "it is really scary," thanks them and leaves. Now the haunted house is for real. High excitement. Kids urge each other to "Get in your

places." I am sitting in the middle with my laptop absolutely unnoticed. The principal comes to check out the safety and supervision. Two kids at a time go through and are given candy for their reward (a subtle exception to the no sugar rule). Karen comes to watch. Hard to believe this is a only a second / third grade activity.

In the other room, Tero has the electric piano on the Moonlight Sonata, an odd choice, but a pleasant accompaniment to the scene of one hundred apples hanging by their stems off long strings across the classroom. Kids are trying to bite them with their hands behind their back. They are having a good time. Everyone is bobbing for apples, including Deborah.

Right before lunch Deborah is in tears. Vinny asks, "Why are you crying? Because you don't celebrate Halloween?" Deborah doesn't say. Jasmine answers: "Because she was scared in the haunted house." A few minutes later, Deborah tells the student teacher about the haunted house. "It scared me; it scared me to death." She elaborates: "When I went in the haunted house they scared me and when I went to get the candy all the scary masks came at me and I started to cry. And then they told me to go back in the classroom and they told Karen. And then Alexandra and Stephanie began to be mean to me. They called me names and then we started to be friends again." Despite the strong feelings conveyed by her story, Deborah is fully repaired as she leaves for lunch.

Later she chooses not to hear the librarian's scary story. At the end of the day, kids are talking about trick or treat plans. I ask Deborah about hers and she says simply, "We don't celebrate Halloween." I ask: "Is it for a religious reason?" No answer. "Are you a Jehovah's Witness?" She whispers, "No, my family is Christian." Deborah offers no more information to me or to Karen, who has overheard this exchange. I wonder how did a child so young figure out that she was so different from the rest of the class. Why did she say Christian without any explanation of details? Given Deborah's reticence, Karen did not probe, nor would she have let me violate this child's privacy. I record Deborah's laconic answer, but I don't know what to make of it in connection with her tears, or lack of costume.

That Deborah shared her fears with student teachers and friends (even as they reverted to typical second grade exclusionary behavior) confirmed that she felt emotionally safe enough to confide her feelings — no small matter. But seven weeks into Deborah's tentative PS 131 membership, she was confronted with a foreign, slightly forbidden marker of the school community. Her reluctant disclosure, "My family is Christian," got lost, the strong Halloween celebration flowed around her, and her struggles with whether Halloween is religious went unrecognized.

Deborah found her own way to reaffirm participation in the community. At the end of the Halloween school day, when her peers went out to scare the world, collect UNICEF money and gross out on sugar, she went home to a regular school night. Deborah (alone in the class) did her writing homework:

> At clay class we make all kinds of things like animals and plaques. We go there on Tuesdays. Karen puts us in groups. Each class in PS 131 goes but they go on different days. It is a lot of fun. The clay teacher sometimes tells us what to make but most time we do whatever we whant to do. The best thing of all is James made a army out of clay.

One might conclude from this writing —so distant from the recent excitement — that Halloween made no impact on Deborah, but perhaps it is no accident that she chose a subject that re-integrated her with a community where all children participate. She deftly captures the predictable regularity of the Tuesday art making where each class has a turn, where the teachers are present and put children in groups, choices are sometimes given, plaques and animals are crafted, and the pleasure in a peer's clay army is high.

A Community Celebration: "The Way It Is"

An interview with Janet Klapper, the principal, on November 1,1996, represents accurately, I think, the school community's view of Halloween:

> Halloween is a joy in this school, a metaphor and an excuse. Our school celebration brings the community together in a generosity of spirit, a playfulness. It is a way for the children, educators, and parents to join on an even plain, a way for us to care for one another. The school works as a community as the day moves along and floors combine to have joint activities. It's a party for 600 . When else could I dress up as a little boy with freckles giving out carrots as a character from a storybook. Parents and teachers use Halloween as an opportunity to make it safe to take risks. Kids and adults take emotional risks and physical risks. It is the community taking a mirror to itself.

"The community taking a mirror to itself," suggests a powerful image of a ritual that binds its members and Deborah wasn't included. Deborah was an outsider on Halloween, her feelings surely heightened by the day's high adrenaline nature. According to Patricia Calderwood (1998), outsiders do not experience a sense of community. These are her conditions for community (pp. 1-2):

- For a social group to be in community there must be a belief that they in fact share identity, beliefs, values, norms, practices, history and goals specific and unique to the group and distinguishable from those of other social groups.

- Existing or potential tensions and differences between competing values, beliefs and practices within the group must be recognized, reconciled or tolerated.

- There need to be actual times and events which celebrate a sense of being in community, including celebrations marking entering or exiting community membership or changing status within the community.

- Competent membership within community must be learned.

If Deborah is going to benefit from this foreign experience and learn to be part of an inclusive community, even when she differs significantly, the school needs to acknowledge her by recognizing her own religious values. If a community is going to include *all* families, schools and families have to reach for a different standard of awareness.

By venerating Halloween, the school does not mean to marginalize any child's religious experience. Faculty and administration take their Halloween celebration for granted; any fallout happens inadvertently. Questions from the outside help jog understanding of "the way it is.". From an interview with the principal (11/1/96):

> The undergraduates I teach had spent the day in the school and came in full of their responses. I must say I thought they were very judgmental. They asked what about kids who don't have money for costumes and are next to kids who come in all elaborate because mothers have time and money? I said, "You're right; that is a good question and I'm going to tell you what I am observing. There are not judgments about costumes." That is the thing, kids care for each other. Not a 100% but there is a spirit of caring. The seminar students said things that made me think they didn't trust children. They made me realize the very premise of everything here is absolutely trusting the kids.
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> The students asked what about the children who can't participate? What about religious sects that don't believe in Halloween? So I spoke with them about how we work with each kid and each family. Many teachers... well three...came and asked me and we spoke with the families and gave them choices. The families could say, "It is alright for my child to do this, but not this." "My child could have

> candy, but not celebrate." But it is not only the students who wonder about Halloween. I have six principals in this district who are friends, who are in a book group with me. None of them do Halloween in their schools. I spoke to the students about being careful not to give away an entirely positive experience because of a few negative or difficult problems. I said to them, it's like deciding to have a silent lunch because there are discipline problems. Better to figure out the little problems in the big picture and keep the vision than do away with the vision because of the little problems.

Karen was not one of the three teachers who approached the principal, even though she would have met the family on any ground. But she was not in a position to do it alone, without help from the family. Had Karen known Deborah's background, she might have been more alert to Deborah's awkward responses to her classmates' questions and helped her to talk about her lack of costume; she might have prepared her for the haunted house and heard her questions about the origins of Halloween. She might have created an opportunity for Deborah to talk to the class (or at least a small group) about why Halloween was not part of her tradition. But Karen had no clue that Deborah did not "celebrate Halloween" nor did she know that Deborah and her family were Christian or what that might mean for Deborah's participation in the classroom. Even were Karen Christian herself, she would not necessarily know the code; being Christian doesn't preclude celebrating Halloween. Deborah's halting admission conveyed too little information and Karen was reluctant to probe beyond what was offered in an area that is usually off limits in school. Religion simply does not show up clearly enough on the radar screen of the non-religious.[11]

"Community" is derived from the Latin word *communis* , and in its earliest and most enduring sense, links *under obligation* with *together* (Williams quoted in Patricia Calderwood, p. 2), which prompts the thought that if classroom community is going to expand to include all families, then Karen, Deborah, and Virginia (and Karen adds "the public") share an obligation to talk

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[11] In a documentation study group meeting about this issue, someone felt strongly that there are so many religious kids in NYC public schools that it was egregious that Karen wasn't more aware. But I am making the case that there is a difference between knowing that some kids don't celebrate Halloween for religious reasons, which most teachers know, including Karen, and the knowledge that it takes to understand and then make talk about it welcome in the classroom.

about Halloween. But who has the burden to begin? What is the family's responsibility for providing knowledge to the teacher?

An [Unconscious] Barrier Between Home and School

Although Deborah's mother, Virginia, had no experience guiding her daughter through Halloween, she had thought carefully about her stance. She rearranged her work schedule to stay for the school parade because she "was curious," and also, I am speculating, to see what Deborah saw. A week after Halloween, Virginia joined a class trip and talked along the way for the tape recorder about why she wanted Deborah at school on Halloween:

> If Deborah was 12 and I would have sent her somewhere away from home and if I said to her "As Seventh-day Adventists, we don't believe in Halloween, " she would always have that zeal to know, to want to know. And perhaps she may defy me or defy rules. She might not want to get into it as much as if she knows what it is.
>
> Especially in this society to strive well, to be able to know what she believes, I think Deborah must have a reason for what she believes. When she has a reason she can understand, she can distinguish. Because when I grew up all I knew is that this is right, this is wrong. So I want her to be able to answer why you don't do that. She must be able to say "I don't do it because.." and to know something about the reason why.

Virginia was determined that her daughter know the difference between home and the wider world—but not at the expense of eroding religious values at home. This emphasis on nurturing Deborah's ability to distinguish right from wrong by experiencing differences is based on an appeal to rationality rather than tradition. Handing down values by this method involved some risk that the forbidden would be too appealing, yet Virginia was confident that Deborah's religious values would remain solid in this secular environment. She felt no urgency to initiate a conversation about religion with anyone at school. Virginia agreed with the principal that giving up Halloween was not a necessary good, but neither did she feel she needed to help the school or Karen understand then what was at stake for Deborah so that Karen could help Deborah with the murkier features of Halloween.

Perhaps in the area of religion, Virginia tended to discount school, since she assigned it no role in helping Deborah clarify Halloween. It may be that

unconsciously Virginia is giving off signals that school isn't important, which could certainly affect how Deborah approaches her school work, and even her homework. For Deborah's learning at home and school to be connected, both Karen and Virginia need to see each other's world more clearly.

As it turned out, one Halloween was enough for Deborah; she did not come to school on Halloween the following year.[12] Thus all by itself, the school's very salient celebration of Halloween will always temporarily exclude her — unless there are changes. Some children caught between home and school might silently withdraw from classroom life to spend their time on the edges as marginalized non-members. Or some children might be left searching for a safe place, wondering what was the matter with them if no one discovered their interests or invited them to connect to school. Yet cultural interchange is a reciprocal process, replete with competing values. Teachers do a better job of teaching when they know what's important to the child, but if children and parents don't feel ready to bring parts of themselves to school, what can teachers do? Is it not the school's responsibility to create the openings?

Religion Out of School

Because Deborah did not bring her religious belief into school on her own, one might conclude that religion does not loom as large as it does for her mother. That's possible, but I doubt it. Deborah is engaged in the moral, factual, historical, and biblical aspects of religion. A few excerpted examples from my notes —all taken out of school — show her interests:

> April 14, 1997: On a school half-day, I took Deborah out for pizza and a chat. When we got our pizza and sat down, she opened the conversation by saying that her mother told her I was Jewish. "I saw a Jew once," she continued. "Jews wear black hats." She recounted a video where Jews and Christians changed clothes to fool the police. "We are all alike under the clothes," she concluded. I tell her Karen is Jewish and her mouth drops open in acute surprise. I do not get a clear sense of what is in her head about this new information. Again probing on religious matters feels uncomfortable to me.

[12] When Karen read this draft, she pointed out that "Deborah was too scared to learn from Halloween the first time; she needed another chance to 'know.' " When I talked to Deborah after this paper was written, a full 18 months later, she remembered Halloween vividly, especially the issue of whether Halloween was religious and whose religion it was. "My mother says "it is devilish." And of course how scared she was and how she cried.

May 5, 1997 The first activity at home is drawing. Deborah made an elaborate title page for "Jesus Stories" decorated with butterflies.

May 18, 1997. The surround at home is full of religion, from the music on the tape player to the several versions of the Bible for Children, which are prominently displayed. After church with Deborah and her family, we sit on the living room rug reading the story of Esther together, one of Deborah's favorites. Deborah knows a huge amount about it. She does not so much dispute the story but interrogate it.

Later when I had my coat on and Deborah was sitting on the couch, she asked me whether I had gone to church with anyone else. I answered that I had never been to a church without a member of the congregation. She said: "No, I mean with anyone in the class." And then she allowed that Felicia had said she was Christian. And Deborah added, as if she were telling something very secret and sensitive —"Alexandra was the first one I told I was Christian." [13]

Feb. 1, 1998 Virginia recounts a time when Deborah was not ready to leave the house in the morning and "I just left her. Then I looked back and she was coming. But I thought to myself I will never do that again. When she caught up with me, Deborah asked: "Does God care about children? Does God care whether you treat me that way?"

Developmental issues always intertwine with a seven year old's belief systems. So do the permeable boundaries between a parent's and child's beliefs. Karen certainly questions whether any young children's religion feeling "comes from their bellies." But when I try to see the world from a religious child's perspective, I grant it must feel strange to approach moral questions at school without bringing in God. If part of Deborah's identity is her relationship to God, then she can't bring her whole self to school when she leaves religion at home.

Religious Boundaries Hold Firm

Karen was not against talk of religion in the classroom on principle.[14] Rather she felt that Deborah didn't bring her religion to school because religion

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[13] Kemly McGregor, a colleague on our research team and an Adventist herself, has guided me in thinking through some of these issues. She finds it hard to imagine—"almost inconceivable" — in her own life to have been in Deborah's position, in a secular school without the Bible stories and religious talk that are so absent for Deborah.

[14] When religion was clearly an issue, Karen heard easily. The second semester student teacher, a practicing Hindu, could not go swimming with the class because her religion forbade her to wear

was private. Until I began to share drafts with Virginia, I treated what I learned from Deborah and her parents as confidential. Therefore, Karen's speculation was based on what she knew. She recalled that when Tonio's mother complained at a parent meeting that she no longer knew what her son was doing at school, Karen responded: "At this age children begin to need a private life at school." Virginia said over and over how important that comment was for her to recognize Deborah's privacy. Karen picked up on Virginia's response to suggest that children need privacy at home about their school life and privacy in school about their home life. It is possible, however, that religious parents and children have gotten used to the idea that no one wants to hear about their religion. Perhaps Virginia or Deborah just lacked an opening; with an invitation, they each might have felt welcome to talk. A line from Virginia's interview might be a clue (11/7/96): "If you ask Deborah, she will tell you she reads scripture before she leaves home every day...." *If you ask her.* No one at school was asking. Should they be?

In Deborah's daily writing, what she shared with classmates at circle, and the conversations between Deborah and her friends to which I was privy, the line between home and at school held firm. Virginia and Karen did not discuss religion at any conference, in any written communication, or informal conversation. Used to keeping her Adventist faith to herself outside of her home, church, and neighborhood, Virginia had no inclination to lobby Karen about acknowledging it the classroom. This typical silence probably encourages children — including Deborah — to leave an important part of themselves at home. Deborah may have gotten the message that her religious beliefs might not be welcome or appropriate at her new school. Home and school messages may have been reciprocally effective in keeping her Christian beliefs private, even secretive. In what way these mutually reinforcing messages may have interfered with Deborah's learning is hard to tell without the full scale child study which is not yet complete. It may never be completely clear.

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a swim suit in front of any adult male, namely the lifeguard and fathers who accompanied the children. Karen encouraged her to explain to the children and created the opportunity.

3
THE 7:30ISH TALENT SHOW: RECOGNIZING RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS WITHIN SECULAR SCHOOL CULTURE

It is a worthy challenge for schools to take religious practice as seriously as does Deborah's family and to recognize their obligations to God within the school's secular culture. Since the religious barrier between home and school remained in place through Deborah's first year in Karen's class, the Friday night Talent Show rose up as a problem.

When PS 131 announced the talent show tryouts, Deborah and three friends chose to dance and lip-synch "Are We There Yet?" These second graders—all new to the school— attended rehearsals, planned what to wear, and managed their tape recorder throughout, a feat of independence highly valued by the school. On Thursday before the Friday event, when Deborah's mother asked what time Deborah would be "on", Karen was busy organizing for the day and didn't think to relay the informal cultural norm that late endings figure in the perennial talent show mythology ("Wow. Last year I didn't get home until 11:30...."). Pointing to the published schedule sent by the parents who organized the talent show, Karen said "7:30ish." It never crossed Karen's mind that the exact time mattered.

Finally, this long-anticipated Friday event arrived. PS 131's annual talent show represents the school's culture as much as a cock fight represents the Balinese (Geertz, 1973). *The New Yorker* once did a "Shouts & Murmurs" piece on the talent show's wit. A parent forewarned me: "The show is crowded, noisy, and chaotic, but with some real strokes of genius." The school rents an excellent sound system, all the better to hear your child over the steady din of the audience talking. Anyone in the student body who wants to perform and shows up for rehearsal is in. This parent-organized evening has moments of pizzazz and an inclusive community feel. Kids often mark the passage of time by what they perform at this yearly event. From my June 6th field notes:

> The parent-run rehearsal with the rented-sound system starts at 2:30. Kids eat acres of parent-provided pizza. The show is scheduled to begin at 6:30 with pre-K kids first and fifth graders last. Deborah's mother arrives at 5:15. I know Friday begins her

Sabbath and as I watch her settle into a folding chair and sit absolutely still, I refrain from interrupting her, not suggesting we go for a cup of tea, which had been my original instinct. After an hour and 15 minutes in the same position, I assume that this is her time to get in a worshipful frame of mind to symbolically mark the Sabbath.

By 7:30, the program has not nearly advanced to Deborah's group. At 7:40, I see her mother's seat is empty. After an announcement over the loudspeaker fails to locate Deborah, her group performs without her at 9:20. The other children in her dance (and their parents) are perplexed and disappointed.

On Monday Deborah explained to me, "My mother was tired and she got mad at me for no reason; she didn't even let me find the kids to tell them I was going." Eight months later, Virginia told me, with deep feeling, as if the incident just happened, "Deborah spent the first hour running up to the organizer asking when her time would be. I told Deborah in advance that if she hadn't performed by sundown, she would have to leave. When sundown came, we had to leave. I didn't say anything to Karen because I don't want to make an exception of my child" (2/1/98).

Chipping Away from Both Sides of the Barrier

Barriers separating teachers' and families' cultures can be at times impenetrable. For Deborah's mother, her presence at this talent show after sundown was a sacrilege. But Karen did not know that Deborah's family acknowledges the preeminence of God by tithing in time as they do in money. She had no reason to know that Seventh-day Adventists believe in "giving your resources of time and money to God, since you only have them because God gives to you." Had Karen understood the religious life of Deborah's family, she would not have taken Virginia's question about the timing so casually. She needed to know more than the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath begins at sundown and more about the particular beliefs that matter to this family.

When Deborah said about a missed Friday slumber party: "It's not fair. I can't go on Fridays," Karen said to me that: "Deborah holds herself and looks in. Deborah's parents hold her back; part of belonging is spending time with kids." Karen would have never been so judgmental, had she thought about the religious values underlying the family's choices.

That some religious sects observe the Sabbath on Friday or don't celebrate Halloween is part of teachers' fund of general knowledge, but cultural interchange requires deeper understanding of attitudes. Since the same religion functions differently for different families, Karen needed to understand how violating the essential nature of the Sabbath affects Virginia's and Deborah's relationship with God—a topic that doesn't come up routinely in teacher preparation or professional development settings. We live in a country governed by church / state boundaries. Non-religious teachers who came of age in the sixties, especially in NYC (and I include myself) fill the school's job rolls. We have had no incentives to acquire that knowledge, even as the times and the demographics of our classrooms change.[15]

Parents, especially if they differ in significant ways from the mainstream culture of the school, often keep their voices muted. Then teachers never have the chance to learn, parents feel they are not being heard, and the cycle of ignorance and mismatch continues. Parents need to take some responsibility, but in an atmosphere where they need not hesitate to come forth. Virginia had no clue that Karen's advice about the time was just the parent-organizer's estimate, and she didn't approach Karen because "I don't want to make an exception of my child." Virginia does not approve of the church / state separation: "It is just an excuse for one more of the many biases in this country." But she certainly is aware how this separation becomes a barrier that makes it hard to consider an exception "legitimate." Karen could easily have arranged for Deborah's group to go earlier—had she known it was important. Such "special" treatment would have been in keeping with the school's philosophy and, I am speculating, no one would have thought twice about it. But the lack of knowledge on the school's part and Virginia's reluctance to provide information will leave the barrier impermeable until religion is safely discussible.

Because Karen had taken uncommon steps to get to know parents and Virginia had a reservoir of good will, this is a best case scenario of a misstep around religious practice, easier to think about without sensationalizing

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[15]See Gary Alan Fine and Jay Mechling on symbolic demography —the tendency of people to act according to images and ideas acquired earlier in a particular social, demographic location. "Child Saving and Children's Cultures at Century's End" in Heath, Shirley Brice and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, eds. (1993). *Identity and Inner-City Youth: Beyond Ethnicity and Gender.* New York: Teachers College Press.

consequences. Another mother might have blamed Karen or the school for omitting the real information about timing, labeling her error as insensitive, or even a cultural transgression. An irritated, maybe angry parent, might have removed her child from school.

In this vein, I could have focused the story on Deborah's anticipation and powerlessness against what must have been an interminable anxiety while she watched her chance to perform in the talent show diminish to nothing. I could have highlighted the deprivation she felt by not being part of the classroom community of girls who got to know each other better at sleepovers--and for some children this would be crippling. As it was Deborah and her friends mastered their disappointments, and life in the classroom went on almost as usual, as least as far as the data I collected. But to overlook this example's significance is to revert to view of the non-religious. Perhaps Deborah is resilient because her mother tells her: "God makes different circumstances and you take advantage of them."

Some well-intentioned educators oppose any exploration of personal religious beliefs as too intrusive, incurring too high a risk and too high a cost in invading the family's privacy. But it is only if schools make a comfortable space for religion that parents will be at ease requesting an exception. How many other parents, perhaps observant Jews or other Seventh-day Adventists, have never come to the talent show and never been asked why? Karen was surprised that Virginia came. But why should this family be excluded from a community event? Would it be too ideal to wish that parents and teachers could understand how important religion is to this family?

Despite (or because of) all the Friday night events that built a community, PS 131 was ultimately a fortuitous choice for this family, especially in light of how Virginia chose the school as if all public schools were the same. Virginia wrote Karen a handwritten end-of-the-year letter two weeks after the talent show:

> This year has been a very exciting one for Deborah and to some extent to us-her parents. Deborah is enjoying her new environment. She especially loves class trips, reading class at after school, and having play dates with some of her classmates. She is unfolding socially and otherwise and because of this has started to reveal

some of unpleasant character flaws, some of which you may have noticed.

First I would like to thank you for the way you have handled her this school year and for your observations. I have noticed your interest in helping her by the books you give her and some of the written assignments she has had to do. I trust that those tactful counsels would eventually take root in her young mind. I am indeed grateful that Deborah is privileged to be in your class for another year, Karen. I do not know if someone else might as quickly as you have been able to look past her charms to her needs.

It is my desire that by the Grace of God, you would have a restful vacation.....

Deborah's experience at the talent show showed a serious crack in the congruence between home and school, but Deborah and her family had other avenues available to them to join the classroom community. As it turned out, Karen built strong bridges with this family. This is a classroom where — except around religion — vigorous cultural interchange takes place.[16] Perhaps religion is less important in such a setting. My point is to raise questions and to consider whether those bridges Karen built bear too much weight when religious belief is ignored.

Small Hopeful Signs

Recently, I heard a child having a small tantrum in front of her mother. In a piercing voice, she whined: "NO, I don't want my party on Friday; I want it on Saturday night so Deborah can come." The adult schedulers might take note. Perhaps PS 131 could become a Saturday night kind of school, although that might be shifting one set of constraints for another. Changing the character of the school is not the point; rather it is to find ways to acknowledge Deborah's beliefs.

As I was writing this paper and discussing religious belief with Karen, (the first such talk in 17 years of intense conversation and we have barely begun), she kept me informed of new developments in the class. In early March Deborah read aloud to the class the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The next week on Purim, Karen brought Hamantoschen for the class, which opened an

[16] This aspect of Karen's class is reported in "A Fertile Context for Cultural Interchange", (in preparation).

opportunity for Deborah to tell everyone the story of Esther, one of her favorite Bible stories. When I talked to Deborah about this paper, the pride in her voice — so clear on the tape— is evidence of a new classroom connection: "One thing I learned this year is that some people in the class are Jews, well actually I learned that last year because you told me. There are stories that I know that Jews know. I know about Esther. Esther is a Jew." Before Deborah didn't see her religion as something to bring to school, but now she has shared a piece of herself she never thought she could. This connection contributes to her own developing world view. The sharing is also an opportunity for her own self-expression as she grows as a storyteller and becomes a carrier of her own culture.

4
Exploring the Boundaries Between Home and School: The Necessity of Collaborative Forums

By choosing a public school in the first place, Virginia showed that she was ready for a new adventure. Her family was prepared to "willingly accept some measure of disequilibrium, expand or shift their world view, occasionally have their assumptions upset, and tolerate the uncertainty that accompanies encounters with strangers" (proposal, 1996, p. 3), making them a good choice for looking at the issues set forth by this project. Virginia was clearly ready for a wide perspective (11/7/96):

> Before I came [to PS 131] I looked at education differently, I used to think that for children to grow up spiritually you better take them to an Adventist school. I wouldn't say I was shut in, but I was one-sided....But I was amazed at the respect and how we were embraced by people of all races. Deborah can see that. I think she will deal better in our society. This is preparation for the world ahead of her, to work and live in this society...To me she is closer to the White kids because she has no choice...I think being with those kids who, you might say, are more national than she is, I think she will be able to understand and adapt better than if she were only in our society.

Karen's classroom was a good place for the family. Karen works hard at drawing parents in and creating opportunities for parents to gain first-hand knowledge of the classroom. As a matter of school policy PS 131 allows families unrestricted access; Karen's classroom door is always open, whether

children are calmly working at tables, sprawled on the floor in what some adults might call disarray, or in a noisy transition from one activity to another. Karen finds it helpful for parents to see their children doing whatever it is they are doing, so she invites parents to drop in unscheduled if they can re-arrange their work or have an extra hour. Parents join whatever activity is taking place. At the beginning of the year parents come to "check up"; later on many lead an activity. Parents come on frequent field trips and Karen works hard at seeing they enjoy themselves so they want to repeat the experience. Karen values parents' knowledge of their child. From day one she invites parents to write to her. She has twice yearly parent conferences where she asks, "Tell me about *your* child," even though she frequently gets the response, "But I thought I was going to listen and you were going to talk." She writes long, insightful twice yearly narrative report cards.

Virginia accepted Karen's invitation to write, she came on trips, attended conferences, and dropped in at least once, joining the circle to describe a *New Yorker* cover (6/16/97) of tourists on a bus looking at New Yorkers dressed as animals. She came to the All-School Square Dance to see this American dance form she had never seen, but alas, she had to leave at sundown, before the music started. Still, all this exposure did not promote talk of religion at school. It was only in the second year, when Karen began a series of monthly parent meetings that any talk at all of religion came to the surface.

Parent -Teacher Talk

In June a grateful parent asked Karen, "What can I do?" Karen answered immediately: "A parent group -- a few parents, eight times next year. At these meetings, Karen and a handful of parents, including Virginia, described children's work according to the Descriptive Review processes developed by Patricia Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vt. (Prospect, 1986). Each month they looked closely at a child's writing or drawing to learn more about its creator. During many formal go-arounds, participants each contributed a single statement about what they noticed. Every person's statement needed to be anchored to the work, requiring members of the group to resist the all-too-human tendency to speculate, interpret, or judge. Since the process encourages only one statement per go-around from each person, more facile thinkers and talkers must check themselves, which slows

the process down and supports more respectful listening. Month after month, reflecting on a word and describing a drawing or a piece of writing, this talk over time provided a forum where teachers learned what parents think and parents learned what teachers think. For Karen, these groups build a community based on shared knowledge about children, and change the participants in fundamental ways: "People will not stand for a non-trusting relationship after they participate in this group. You have to be your own honest self and that feels good so you never want to give it up."

One of the Prospect activities is a Descriptive Review of a Child (Prospect, 1986). [17] When Virginia heard about it, she was interested and agreed to begin preparing a review of Deborah. I met with Virginia and typed her lyrical description of Deborah into my laptop as she talked about Deborah's strengths and vulnerabilities; then Diane culled her classroom records, gathered work samples, and made up-to-date observations. We all met together one lunch time in February, 1998 to find a focusing question. I have done many Descriptive Reviews in my teaching life, but preparing this one became an opportunity for me to put Virginia's perspective side-by-side with Karen's to see some ways they saw the world differently.

The Eight Questions

In order explore the issue of divergent views, I am turning to Ann Fadiman's exquisite 1997 book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. In it, she includes Harvard medical school professor Arthur Kleinman's set of eight questions designed to elicit a patient's "explanatory model" (p. 260-61). She says "The first few times I read these questions they seemed so obvious I hardly noticed them; around the fiftieth time, I began to think that, like many obvious things, they might actually be a work of genius." I agree. Based on that February meeting between Virginia and Karen, a letter written by Virginia, and

[17] Descriptive Review of a Child is the presentation of a parent's and teacher's description of a child to a group of 6-10 colleagues. This description is centered on a focusing question which frames the presenter's request for feedback and recommendations. After an uninterrupted presentation, participants ask questions to clarify the description. In the next go-around, the group offers recommendations for practice, always building on the child's strengths. Finally, the group considers whether the session respected the child and the family. One central goal is to stay away from judgment or evaluation; the aim is careful, balanced description of the child.

an interview with Karen, I have set down how I think Karen and Virginia might answer these eight questions. The medical model focuses on "the problem" or "the sickness," but based on the transcript of the meeting, I substituted the word "struggles."

1. *What do you call the struggle [the problem]?*

   Karen: Deborah doesn't trust herself .

   Virginia: Deborah fights against constructive thoughts and commands.

2. *What do you think has caused the struggle [problem]?*

   Karen: Too much responsibility at home for her sisters.

   Virginia: Not carrying out the responsibility God knows she is capable of.

3. *Why do you think it started when it did?*

   Karen: She is playing with larger questions like "whose in charge at home?"

   Virginia: To Deborah things at school don't matter; She'll have work to do but she'll set it aside to help her sister.

4. *What do you think this struggle [sickness] does? How does it work ?*

   Karen: It makes her copy her work from a book and not "learn from the belly." Not trust herself.

   Virginia: She can't settle down academically, she forgets what she is not interested in, she does her work just to get over it. She is irresponsible.

5. *How severe is the problem [sickness] ? Will it have a long or short course?*

   Karen: It will be solved over time.

   Virginia: Too frightening to think about.

6. *What interventions [treatment] should the child [patient] receive. What are the most important results you hope for?*

   Karen: She should have less responsibility at home; more limits to her authority and more encouragement for responding to her feelings.

   Virginia: that she will carry out God's will and fulfill her responsibilities. ("I tell Deborah whenever she does wrong...I always say God knows you are able and that is your responsibility to carry it.")

7. *What are the chief results of the struggle [sickness]?*

Karen: Deborah restricts herself and limits her connections.

Virginia: the signals she sends to me are frightening

8. What do you fear most about the problem [sickness]?

Karen: That she won't trust herself

Virginia: that my relationship with God will be affected because I am obligated to steer her against the tidal waves of irresponsibility.

Also relevant is the writing Virginia enlisted Deborah to do on responsibility. Deborah neatly wrote in her notebook:

3/13/97

Re-spon-si-ble

Resonsible means able to answer ones conduct and obligation and trustworthiness. Responsible means talking care of things that belongs to me. Being able to do my work at home at school and at church without somebody always telling me to do what I know I have to do and following instructions well. Responsible means I should behave well so that my little sisters would have a good example of me. I should obey the rules at school and everywhere I go. That I must do my writing, reading, and drawing everyday and do them well. Being responsible means trying not to do wrong to other peole. It also means listening to my parents.

Karen and Virginia had two different explanatory models of Deborah's struggle. The secular school culture of PS 131, of which Halloween was a significant part, and Virginia's God-centered culture where responsibility is primarily to God's law do not have to be mutually exclusive. People participate in both cultures. But parent and teacher cannot begin to see the world through each other's eyes until each recognizes the potency of the other's culture.

If cultural interchange — learning to see the world through others' eyes — is to benefit children in the classroom, then teachers and families must find ways to make their traditions, values and beliefs explicit. Kleinman says: "'If you can't see that your own culture has it own set of interests, emotions, and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else's culture? (quoted in Fadiman p. 261).'" Unlike the "collision" in Ann Fadiman's book, the difference between Karen's and Virginia's world views are not life-threatening

for Deborah. I suggest that the habit of asking these questions—even mentally— is a reminder of the need to recognize differences by making them explicit.

Another interesting aspect related to how Virginia and Karen viewed Deborah came out of this February meeting. Karen focused on the copying that she still saw in Deborah's work. In Deborah's June, 1997 narrative report, Karen had written:

> When Deborah first came to class, her writing was more a replication of some of her reading. Now she writes of her life, and sometimes gets the germ of an idea from her reading as she did for "The Girl Who Loved Toys." She is much the poet. She brings a depth and sincerity to the classroom by her engagement in working.

But at this meeting Karen was still concerned. After showing Virginia the latest example of Deborah's copied work and looking at it together, Karen reinterpreted "copying." Rather than label it as Deborah's lack of trust in herself, Karen began to see Deborah's copying as similiar to the way she understands why children trace cartoons before they draw free hand. As parent and teacher talked, it became clear that Deborah has always used a bit of a printed text as her starting point and then reworked it in her own way. It had just never been so obvious to Karen.

Virginia heard Karen say that Deborah should count "the work of the home" for homework, which might lessen the nightly struggle over school responsibilities. A few days later Deborah brought in a cake along with a handwritten recipe.

Lest it appear that Deborah's mother sees only Deborah's resistance to responsibility, let me end with a quote from the 1997 year-end letter. After describing her terror of Deborah's irresponsibility, she wrote:

> On the other hand, my "little gem" as I affectionately call her, can be a most gracious, thoughtful, and potentially brilliant child. I am sometimes amazed at her level of reasoning. She enjoys being a big sister and love doing fun things. In fact, you may have noticed in her writing and speaking that she sums up time and events with this single work "fun".

Conclusion: The Processes Cultural Interchange

We are just beginning to work out the elements of cultural interchange as a process. Some elements are obvious and some are not.. As Anne Fadiman says, sometimes the obvious is ignored.

Growth Over Time

The capacity to see through others' eyes is not a one-shot event. To recognize what is central to another person (in Cynthia's case her relationship with God), then understand it, appreciate, and take account of it in action requires educators to engage in processes which occur over time. These processes are especially important when teachers to work with children and families who are very different from themselves.

Unrestricted Access

The process of cultural interchange, I have come to believe, must include opportunities for families to have unrestricted access to the classroom, especially when the school is different from parents' own experience. This is in and of itself threatening to many teachers, but educators must begin to think hard about it as schools change as both schools and demographics change simultaneously. [18] Children and parents must feel welcome at school and in the classroom so they can develop informal relationships that lead to trust, and therefore greater identification with each other.

Side-by-Side Conversation

Because parents have a responsibility to help teachers understand their views, there must be opportunities for conversation. Yet it is hard for families — especially outside the mainstream — to initiate that conversation. Karen happens to use the formal processes developed by the Patricia Carini to initiate conversation, but all collaborative forums help. When the atmosphere supports an obligation to speak openly and honestly, and parents and teachers sit side-by-side to talk about what matters to them rather than separately in hallways and grocery store aisles, possibilities emerge for creating a new school culture that recognizes differences, and at the same time, reduces the distance between home and school. As parents and teachers gain a greater

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[18] See the April 5, 1998 *The New York Times* article in the Education Life section by Amy Wells. She suggests that college educated parents are the ones demanding access to school and the right to make decisions about curriculum, but I believe that most parents and children benefit by a closer relationship with school and with the classroom teacher. Therefore access (even if it comes initially without curricular decision-making power) is worth considering for the opportunities for forming relationships between parents and teachers.

understanding of each other's perspectives, they develop stronger voices to articulate their own fears, knowledge, priorities, constraints, and concerns. The results of formal processes for sitting side by side across boundaries provide an opportunity for teachers and parents to make explicit their attitudes towards children, teachers, and families and come to understand how these attitudes include and exclude children and in what ways the school shows respect for the child and the parents. Regular ongoing conversations allow parents and teachers to bridge the gap that usually separates "expert" school personnel from families who know their children best.

Underlying all these collaborative processes is respect for the areas parents, children, and teachers want to keep separate, even as everything is ideally discussible. Religion is a hard case. When there is no category for "religion" — even a tacit taboo about it in school, and when even teachers who are good observers miss the religious themes in a child's work, schools have to consider how to listen to children's and parents' religious values as legitimate. It won't be easy. As the case of Deborah reveals, there is a press from both home and school for silence around religion. Virginia did not want her child to stand out as different, both were concerned that no one was interested, and the general discomfort about religion in a secular place all contributed to the silence.

"Communicative virtues" help. These "communicative virtues" are essential for cultural interchange (Burbules and Rice, 1991) and can be developed over time in collaborative forums:

> These virtues include tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one's own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may "have a turn" to speak, and the disposition to express one's self honestly and sincerely. The possession of these virtues influences one's capacities both to express one's own beliefs, values, and feelings accurately, and to listen to hear those of others . (p. 411).

A "Working Trust"

Children suffer when dialogue between the adults in their lives is inadequate. In the worst situations, children's problems go undetected or undiscussed, and children fail drastically in ways that might be prevented. More often, a lack of common understanding and an absence of trust between parent

and teacher causes any intimation of problems—real or potential—to cast doubt on a family's or a teacher's competence. When parents and teachers too readily see each other's comments as criticism, the result is irritated parents who then irritate teachers and teachers who irritate parents. A cycle of increasing, but often invisible distrust can erode the parent and teacher's relationship and undermine the child's classroom experience.

Mutual understanding, respect, and trust are necessary and take effort to achieve, especially for those families who belong to groups that traditionally feel less powerful or comfortable in schools. To have a reasonable degree of trust—call it a "working trust" when families and teachers communicate easily and well —teacher and parent do not have to become best friends. With a working trust, teachers and parents become more open about discussing problems, better able to explain what they mean, and less worried about offending each other. When problems arise, they can work out the human tangles. It isn't easy to achieve: trust between schools and families is not a given.

Society's expectation is that children will be changed by school, but our team is arguing that school practice should also evolve in response to children.

The teacher as ethnographer is a worthy response to the challenge of building on the diverse cultures in the classroom ((Mehan, Lintz, Okamoto, Wills, 1995), but cultural interchange depends on more than careful observation, an open mind, and specific knowledge or facts, though all those are necessary. Getting cultural information is rare; teachers often act without it. If there is no opportunity to take account of powerful home perspectives that influence children's thinking, teachers limit their understanding and their ability to act. In order for children to give their full assent to learning (Kohl, 1991)—that is, try hard, open themselves to relationships with teachers, lend themselves to what is being taught (Greene, 1995), think critically, delay closure, tolerate ambiguity—school and teachers must give full respect to the child's cultural values. Otherwise, children can at risk for closing part of themselves off from learning at school.

The Open Questions

That schools don't acknowledge religious difference makes cultural interchange more difficult. Because this particular family had multiple pathways to enter the PS 131 community and felt "warmly embraced", what happened at

Halloween and the Talent Show did not wipe out the two-way exchange even if it may have slowed down the process. In this particular case, family and teacher worked together on behalf of Deborah, but as more schools engage in family - school alliances that honor the world views of "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995), the dilemmas will be more visible. Once children's religious beliefs have been acknowledged, it will be hard to go back, even as educators and the public have to face the conflict that it brings.

What follows from greater teacher awareness of religious belief and religious diversity is not entirely clear. This paper raises the question of whether religion should be discussed in schools. But the obvious parallel between race and religion does not hold: people do not want to convert others to their race, but they may well want others to convert to their religion. One person's racial identity need not threaten another's; many holdings about religious truths implicitly deny or threaten people who believe differently. Even if First Amendment prohibitions do not arise, respect for the religions of others may call, not for discussion, but for respectful silence. But perhaps we should not be too quick to exclude from our schools what is so central to the lives of many of our children.

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